

MOVING BACK HOME

Some Things to Keep in Mind for Children

When a home is finally rebuilt after a disaster, moving into the new house is usually anticipated with hope and excitement. At last, the long months of work and worry have accomplished their goal, and children and their families look forward to getting back to a normal routine. Children may be excited and eager to move out of crowded temporary quarters, to have a room of their own again, to be back in their old neighborhood, and to see familiar friends and places.

In addition to the excitement, however, it is not unusual when moving into the home for children and their families to have a reawakening of memories of the disaster or stressful reactions similar to those experienced after the disaster. This is understandable when you consider that the home that was lost was not only a house, but also the place that symbolized safety and security. Moving into the new house is a reminder of the loss of the old house and the scary way in which it was lost.

Children may become irritable or have difficulty sleeping. They may fall back into behavior patterns from a younger age, and may have stomachaches, headaches, or other physical complaints. They may express fears about the disaster, or may be fearful of the dark or of being alone. It is important for parents to realize that these reactions, which are normal after a disaster, are also perfectly normal when an event such as moving back into the home “triggers” the memories of the disaster. Usually the reactions will go away themselves within a few weeks, especially if parents are understanding and supportive, and if children have the opportunity to talk about their feelings through play or art.

It is important for parents to let children know that these reactions are common when moving back to the place where the disaster happened. They can let children know that parents, too, have these kinds of memories and reactions. It is important to encourage children to talk about their memories and feelings about the disaster. However, it is also important to end the discussions on a positive note, encouraging the child to also talk about how the family survived the disaster, how s/he feels now that almost a year has passed, positive changes s/he experienced since the disaster, things s/he learned since the disaster, or advice s/he would give to other children about what to do to feel better after the disaster.

Parents can help children to rebuild a sense of safety and security by involving them in developing or reviewing a family safety plan, with emphasis on disaster safety in the home and the neighborhood. It is especially important for children who are home alone sometimes to know who in the neighborhood will look out for them and assist them if another emergency happens.

Often, even if the new house is built with exiting improvements over the old one, moving back in can bring pangs of grief for the things that are no longer there to fill the space—pictures, toys, a favorite blanket. It is important to let children talk

about their re-awakened sadness over these losses. Let them know when you have the same kind of feelings. Talk about what you miss most. Let children help in decision making and shopping for furniture and decorations, especially for their own rooms, but also for other areas of the house. If pets were lost in the disaster, their absence will probably really be missed in the new house. It is important to talk about it and when everyone will feel ready to bring another pet into the family.

These suggestions are not intended to put a damper on families' enthusiasm at this happy time. They are simply to reassure families that it is perfectly normal to feel a mixture of happiness and sadness when moving home again. It is simply another step on the road to recovery. It is important to allow the feelings to be shared, while at the same time realizing how far the family has come, and how much has been rebuilt. It is often helpful to have children draw two pictures when they move home again: one of myself and my family the day of the disaster, and one of myself today.